

Solomon P. Ortiz

1937–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 1983–2011
DEMOCRAT FROM TEXAS

After arriving in Washington in 1982, Solomon P. Ortiz joked that his “sense of direction” had become his biggest “weakness.” “I went in one building, went out a different way and had to walk around the block three times before I figured out where I was,” he said. Despite at first feeling “overwhelmed by the big buildings, the marble, the pillars and the responsibility,” Ortiz earned a reputation as a moderate Democrat who was comfortable working behind the scenes and as a tireless champion of his district in southeast Texas. His ability to voice local concerns in national and international conversations was a staple of his legislative style in the House. “Here,” he said shortly before taking the oath of office, “your vote may have an impact worldwide.”¹

Solomon Ortiz’s path to the House began in Robstown, Texas, known as the “Biggest Little Town” in the state.² The eldest son of migrant workers, he was born on June 3, 1937.³ His family struggled to make ends meet, and after his father died he left Robstown Public High School to work as a printer’s aide at the *Robstown Record*.⁴ In 1960 he enlisted in the U.S. Army and earned his general equivalency degree. The military sent Ortiz to France, where he learned the language and worked with the military police. After leaving the Army, Ortiz ran for the office of county constable back in Nueces, Texas, and won in an upset.⁵ It was the year before Congress passed the Voting Rights Act, and America’s electoral system was still segregated. “My mother took out a \$1,000 loan—a fortune for a migrant family in 1964—to bankroll my first campaign,” Ortiz remembered. “The money was mostly to help offset the poll tax for Hispanic voters whose priority was putting food on the table for their families.”⁶ After three years in the constable’s office, Ortiz won election as Nueces County commissioner, becoming the first Hispanic American to sit on the county board. He remained in the

commissioner’s office until 1976, when he was elected the first Hispanic sheriff in county history.⁷ During his early political career, Ortiz attended Del Mar College from 1965 to 1967.⁸ Ortiz and his wife, Irme Roldan, were married in 1970 and had two children together, Yvette and Solomon, Jr., but the marriage ended in divorce.⁹

After the 1980 Census, Texas picked up three seats in the U.S. House.¹⁰ One of the new districts, the 27th, had been drawn to include the region stretching from Corpus Christi south along the Gulf Coast to the city of Brownsville at the U.S.-Mexico border. Many of the district’s residents were Hispanic middle-of-the-road Democrats, and after federal officials approved Texas’ new federal congressional map in 1982, Ortiz emerged early in the race as a front-runner for the new House seat.¹¹

He resigned from the sheriff’s office to campaign full-time, and with 17 years’ experience in local and county politics, he squeaked out a victory in the five-candidate Democratic primary. In the buildup to the general election, Ortiz, who was “very popular in South Texas,” rode a wave of local support.¹² “If he’s not elected, it may be a long time before another Mexican-American has a chance to be elected to Congress,” worried one supporter.¹³ The health of the U.S. economy weighed heavily on the race. Ortiz breezed through the general election; the district’s Democratic majority gave him a 30,000-vote victory, and he took 64 percent of the total vote.¹⁴ “People want to work and they can’t find jobs so they turned to the Democrats for help,” Ortiz said after the election.¹⁵ Over the next 13 election cycles, Ortiz faced little opposition, and he ran unopposed in the general elections of 1986, 1988, and 1990. It was not until 1996 that he again faced opposition in the Democratic primary.¹⁶

From his first day in office, Ortiz seemed to have kept one foot planted firmly in his district. The Democratic



leadership assigned him to the Armed Services and the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committees to support Ortiz as he worked on behalf of the numerous military bases and vital fishing communities in the 27th District. In the winter of 1983 he joined the Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control and remained on the panel until the House disbanded it a decade later. When the House abolished the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee in the early 1990s, Ortiz transferred to the Resources Committee. In the 111th Congress (2009–2011), he joined the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.¹⁷

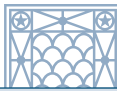
Never having served as a legislator, Ortiz felt out of place initially; Cold War arms policy usually “didn’t matter to a sheriff,” he said in 1982. “A sheriff puts in jail a person violating the law.”¹⁸ As a U.S. Representative, however, Ortiz was responsible for creating laws instead of enforcing them.

The junior Member from Texas quickly earned areputation as a centrist, a “Democratic fence-sitter,” according to the *Wall Street Journal*. He often went out on a limb for his district, appealing to foreign governments and businesses to protect the interests of his constituents, especially those in the shrimp industry.¹⁹ Because his district shared a border with Mexico, Ortiz had a unique perspective on immigration and on America’s economic relationship with Latin America. In 1986, for instance, while the House and Senate considered reforms to the country’s immigration policy, Ortiz, whose district had become a major entry point into the United States, voted for a measure that other Hispanic Representatives deemed too strict arguing that later attempts to reform immigration policy might result in an even harsher bill.²⁰ When those attempts occurred, in the mid-1990s, Ortiz implored his colleagues not to lose sight of the broader national picture: “The greatest danger to an immigration debate in this country is the merging and confusing of issues concerning legal and illegal immigration.... As [a] Representative of a border district, I am uniquely aware of the burden that illegal immigration poses on local communities.”²¹ He continued to champion immigration reform over the years, with the caveat that enforcing and strengthening America’s borders needed to be done “in a responsible way.”²²

Ortiz made it a point to learn his colleagues’ names and positions, and his personality endeared him to Democrats and Republicans alike, according to one of his closest aides.²³ He served as co-chairman of the House Border Caucus, and at the start the 102nd Congress (1991–1993) he was elected chairman of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC), a major assignment since Hispanic voters were becoming increasingly powerful nationwide.²⁴ The 1992 election, which Ortiz won by 13 percent, was a watershed year for minority representation. “I think we’ll have a stronger voice, a louder voice,” he said. Ortiz was a bridge builder; he worked to shape partnerships with non-Hispanic Members and other caucuses, especially those with similar legislative concerns. Calling the CHC’s platform “an American agenda,” he noted, “The problems we face as Hispanics will be the same—housing, jobs and health care.”²⁵

Despite his growing national profile, Ortiz’s primary concern was the interests of his district. By 1993, Ortiz had accrued enough seniority to be named chairman of the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee’s Subcommittee on Oceanography, Gulf of Mexico, and the Outer Continental Shelf. That year he also secured funding for military bases along the Gulf in exchange for supporting President William J. (Bill) Clinton’s national budget—another testament to his growing influence.²⁶ He pushed back against later attempts by officials in the Clinton administration to privatize defense projects in his district and opposed a plan that would have required a hefty deposit for travel to and from Mexico.²⁷ By his 1996 campaign, Ortiz assessed his congressional tenure as “productive and effective,” emphasizing his ability to steer new jobs to the 27th District while protecting existing industry.²⁸ After 14 years in the House, Ortiz remained committed to the aspirations he had expressed as a Member-elect. “We have great responsibilities here,” he said in 1997. “I just hope ... we can focus on the issues that are good for America and my constituents.”²⁹

In 1992, Ortiz began a legislative battle that lasted nearly six years. The discovery that babies in South Texas



were being born with a high incidence of anencephaly, the failure of part or all of the brain to develop, prompted repeated investigations and underscored the need for more medical research. Though Ortiz had support in the CHC and in the Senate, the Birth Defects Prevention Act of 1992 (H.R. 5531), which he introduced on July 1, never made it out of committee.³⁰ In mid-March 1997, bolstered by more than 160 co-sponsors, Ortiz introduced his bill again (H.R. 1114), seven days after the Republicans introduced companion legislation in the Senate (S. 419). The measure provided for the creation of medical centers to study regional birth defects; the findings would be centralized in a national clearinghouse managed by the Center for Disease Control. Because the Senate passed its version of the bill in only four months, House leadership tabled Ortiz's measure and moved forward with the Senate's language. The Texas lawmaker's response was typical. "I don't care about credit," he reportedly said. "The important thing is to get the bill passed."³¹ In a testament to Ortiz's leadership, the House voted 405 to 2 in favor of the Birth Defects Prevention Act, which was signed into law April 21, 1998.³²

Ortiz had always looked out for the military personnel in his district, but veterans' issues and the state of America's armed forces became major priorities toward the end of his House career. He fought for better health care, support, training, equipment, and services for the military.³³ "The soldiers we send forth in today's war on terrorism are tomorrow's veterans," Ortiz said in 2003. "As liberty must be defended, the population of veterans in the United States and south Texas will continue to grow," making it incumbent upon the U.S. Congress to create and maintain an infrastructure to support future generations of military personnel.³⁴ When the Democrats regained control of the House in 2009, Ortiz became chairman of the Armed Services Committee's Readiness Subcommittee.

In 2010, Ortiz lost his re-election bid to Corpus Christi Republican Blake Farenthold. Ortiz ran on the strength of his productivity in the House, but the struggling economy and anti-incumbent sentiment sweeping the country that year made for a grueling campaign. Although Election Day results indicated that Ortiz had lost by only 800 votes, a

recount, which took nearly three weeks, failed to give him the lead.³⁵

During his 28 years in the House, Ortiz tended to keep a low profile, shying away from the limelight. But as one colleague noted, he "fought tirelessly to bring jobs and enhance the quality of life for residents of the Bay of Corpus Christi to the international border with Mexico."³⁶ Late in 2007 on the House Floor, Ortiz reflected on his upbringing and its effect on his political career. "It was in Robstown where my mother taught me my most important lesson: to always serve the community that gave you so many opportunities growing up," he said. "To whom much is given, much is expected."³⁷ After leaving the House, Ortiz returned to South Texas.

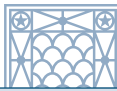
FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, "Solomon P. Ortiz," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

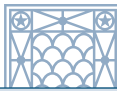
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NOTES

- 1 Betty Cuniberti, "Orientation for Congress' New Members," 10 December 1982, *Los Angeles Times*: J1.
- 2 *Congressional Record*, House, 110th Cong., 1st sess. (11 December 2007): H15244.
- 3 Based on scattered state and federal records, it appears that Ortiz's parents were named Jose Ortiz and Feliciano Ocha. See "Salomon Porfirio Ortiz," *Texas Birth Index, 1903–1997*, Texas Department of State Health Services, Roll number 1937–0006, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., <http://search.ancestrylibrary.com> (accessed 2 February 2012). See also *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930*, Robstown, Nueces, Texas, Roll 2381, page 37B, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., <http://search.ancestrylibrary.com> (accessed 2 February 2012).
- 4 *Congressional Record*, House, 110th Cong., 1st sess. (11 December 2007): H15244.
- 5 "Arena Profile: Rep. Solomon Ortiz," *politico.com*, http://www.politico.com/arena/bio/rep_solomon_ortiz.html (accessed 23 February 2012); *Politics in America, 1994* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1993): 1528.
- 6 *Congressional Record*, House, 109th Cong., 2nd sess. (13 July 2006): H5174.



- 7 *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, "Solomon P. Ortiz," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>; *Politics in America, 1990* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1989): 1504.
- 8 *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, "Solomon P. Ortiz," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.
- 9 According to state records, Ortiz and his wife were married on April 11, 1970. He filed for divorce on August 3, 1979. See *Texas Divorce Index, 1968–2002*, Texas Department of State Health Services, <http://search.ancestrylibrary.com> (accessed 2 February 2012).
- 10 John Herbers, "Minority Group Choices Pivotal in Some Contests," 1 November 1982, *New York Times*: D14.
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- 12 As quoted in Bob Ramsdell, "Police Union Picks Luby over Ortiz," 25 September 1982, *Corpus Christi Caller*: A1. See also Darla Morgan, "Demos Gather Here for Last-Minute Rally," 1 November 1982, *Corpus Christi Caller*: B1; Darla Morgan, "Large Turnout Sends Ortiz to Congress," 3 November 1982, *Corpus Christi Caller*: A1.
- 13 Morgan, "Demos Gather Here for Last-Minute Rally."
- 14 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>.
- 15 Morgan, "Large Turnout Sends Ortiz to Congress."
- 16 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>; Stefani Scott, "Veteran U.S. Rep. Solomon Ortiz Is Facing," 3 March 1996, *San Antonio Express-News*: B2.
- 17 See Garrison Nelson, *Committees in the U.S. Congress, 1947 to 1992*, vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1994): 679; Garrison Nelson and Charles Stewart III, *Committees in the U.S. Congress, 1993–2010* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2011): 877. In 1995 the Armed Services Committee was renamed the Committee on National Security, and in 1999 it was renamed the Committee on Armed Services. The Resources Committee was renamed the Committee on Natural Resources in the 110th Congress (2007–2009).
- 18 Cuniberti, "Orientation for Congress' New Members."
- 19 Jackie Calmes, "The Clinton Tax Package: Hard Sell Is Finished, Now the Political Battle Is Due," 28 May 1993, *Wall Street Journal*: A4; Bryan Burrough, "Struggling South Texas Shrimpers Invade Mexican Waters in Search of Better Catch," 5 October 1984, *New York Times*: 35; "Arena Profile: Rep. Solomon Ortiz," *politico.com*, http://www.politico.com/arena/bio/rep_solomon_ortiz.html (accessed 23 February 2012); Lena Sun, "Congressional Democrats Tell China to Act on Rights of Face Stricture," 1 December 1992, *Washington Post*: A31.
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- 21 *Congressional Record*, House, 104th Cong., 2nd sess. (21 March 1996): H2602.
- 22 *Congressional Record*, House, 106th Cong., 2nd sess. (17 May 2000): H3275–H3276.
- 23 Liam Callanan, "Face Value," 9 February 1992, *Washington Post*: M7; *Politics in America, 2002* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 2003): 1008.
- 24 On the Border Caucus, see *Congressional Record*, House, 107th Cong., 2nd sess. (7 May 2002): H2142.
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- 29 Gary Martin, "S. Texas Lawmakers Vote with Majority," 22 January 1997, *San Antonio Express-News*: A6.
- 30 *Congressional Record*, House, 102nd Cong., 2nd sess. (1 July 1992): 17309; *Congressional Record*, Extension of Remarks, 102nd Cong., 2nd sess. (1 July 1992): 17536.
- 31 *Congressional Record*, House, 105th Cong., 2nd sess. (10 March 1998): 3044–3045.
- 32 For the House debate and vote on S. 419, see *Congressional Record*, House, 105th Cong., 2nd sess. (10 March 1998): 3044–3051. For the law, see Birth Defects Prevention Act of 1998, P.L. 105-168, 112 Stat. 43–45.
- 33 *Congressional Record*, House, Extension of Remarks, 104th Cong. 1st sess. (5 January 1995): E45.
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36 *Congressional Record*, Extension of Remarks, 106th Cong., 2nd sess. (28 September 2000): E1630.

37 *Congressional Record*, House, 110th Cong., 1st sess. (11 December 2007): H15244.